



Department of Veterans Affairs
Testimony of Commissioner Thomas J. Saadi to the Veterans' Affairs Committee
March 7, 2019
SB 861, SB 952, HB 7137 & HB 7138

Good morning Senator Maroney, Representative Borer, Senator Abrams, Representative Boyd, ranking members, and members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee. I am Thomas J. Saadi, Commissioner of the State Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA). I thank you for the opportunity to address you today and I thank our Veterans and service members in our state and across our nation for their service and sacrifice. While the Department supports many of the Committee's raised bills, my testimony will focus on those directly related to the DVA's operations and services.

SB 861 AAC THE DEFINITION OF "SERVICE IN TIME OF WAR" AND STATE RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS FOR CERTAIN VETERANS' SERVICES - I thank the Committee for raising SB 861, which codifies existing practice by removing the statutory two year state residency requirement for admission to the Department's Residential Services program. This bill also removes redundant text from the definition of "Wartime Service," to clarify that qualifying wartime service may be less than the required ninety days if separation from the military was due to an "injury in the line of duty". This is the standard embedded within federal law and has been the practice in Connecticut for many years.

SB 952 AAC THE DEVELOPMENT OF A TRAINING MANUAL AND TRAINING PROGRAMS ON CERTAIN HEALTH CONDITIONS COMMON TO VETERANS - The issue of Veterans' mental health and the recognition of signs and symptoms of mental health illness is exceptionally important. According to a study conducted by the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, each day 20 Veterans commit suicide nationwide, while others struggling to adjust to civilian life may turn to alcohol or drugs. However, while well intentioned, SB 952 imposes a mandate on the DVA to duplicate existing resources available through the federal VA and myriad community-based Veterans' organizations, non-profits, and healthcare professionals. There is not a lack of programs and services but rather a lack of connecting those in need to the available programs and services. As such, the Department will make these resources, a partial list of which is attached to my written testimony, available to Connecticut employers via a quick link on the DVA website, through social media and our network of municipal Veterans Representatives to provide to local employers.

HB 7137 AAC DESIGNATING DRIVERS IN THE OFFICE OF ADVOCACY AND ASSISTANCE DISTRICT OFFICES - The DVA opposes HB 7137, which seeks to mandate the assignment of five Office of Advocacy and Assistance (OAA) staff to drive Veterans to medical appoints and job interviews. Although well intentioned, it does not align with the goal of the OAA, which is to represent Veterans and eligible dependents in their claims for pensions, benefits, and programs with the federal VA.

In fiscal year 2018, OAA responded to 29,611 phone calls, filed 938 new disability and pension claims, and reopened 1,000 claims for increased disability or appeals resulting in over \$5 million in new benefits for our Connecticut Veterans. OAA's Veteran Service Officers attended over 100 outreach events across the state. Additionally, OAA is responsible for administering programs such as the; CT Wartime Service Medal, Veteran owned small business certification, Veteran license flag, indicators and serving as Municipal Veterans' Representatives, all while processing applications from thousands of Veterans each year.

The department recognizes that transportation can be a challenge and is an active member of a task force established pursuant to Special Act 18-3, to study the public transportation needs for, among others, Connecticut's Veterans. The DVA also works each day to connect Veterans with existing transportation options available through the Disabled American Veterans, local chapters of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion as well as other state and municipal services. I have attached partial list of these services to my written testimony, which is also available at each OAA district office. The Department respectfully asks for your consideration to maintain DVA's ability to secure benefits, programs, and services for our Veterans through the OAA.

HB 7138 AA REQUIRING A STUDY OF VETERANS SERVICES OFFERED BY OASIS CENTERS – It is important to understand that the Operation Academic Support for Incoming Service Members (OASIS) centers were established by the Board of Regents (BOR) for Higher Education to serve student Veterans attending the four state universities, twelve community colleges, and Charter Oak State College. These centers help student Veterans and military service men and women with their academic studies, as well as create a friendly environment where Veterans can interact amongst themselves and integrate into school and society. An OASIS is a space to socialize, study and receive mentoring, or become a mentor to other student Veterans.

The DVA is concerned with the underlying premise of this bill that seeks to identify the means for expanding the services of existing OASIS centers to non-students. This presupposes that it is appropriate to transform these student Veteran-focused centers into community Veterans' centers. DVA cautions that such an expansion could negatively impact the capacity of limited resources in the existing centers to carry out their current mission for their student Veterans.

I thank you for your time and your service to our state, and I am happy to respond to any questions you may have.

Veteran Transportation Resources

Federal VA Transportation:

- VA Hospital in Newington, CT: 860-666-6951

Disabled American Veterans:

- West Haven VA – 203-932-5711 (Ext 3575)
- Newington VA – 860-667-6759
- Providence VA – 203-932-5711 (Ext 3575)

State of CT, DSS, Non-Emergency Medical Transportation

- <https://portal.ct.gov/DSS/Health-And-Home-Care/Non-Emergency-Medical-Transportation>
- Medicaid Non-Emergency Medical Transportation (NEMT) is an important benefit for Medicaid members who need to get to and from Medicaid-covered medical services but have no means of transportation.
- State-Wide coverage

Eastern Connecticut Transportation Consortium, Inc

- <http://www.ectcinc.com/>
- Purpose of ECTC is to promote the coordination of transit services in eastern CT. ECTC acts as a broker and operator of transportation services for persons of low-income, elderly, persons with disabilities and others who receive health, social, education assistance services from public and private non-profit agencies.
- ECTC helps the individual navigate and coordinate available transportation resources in Eastern CT.

Senior Centers with Transportation

- http://seniorresourcesec.org/images/SENIOR_CENTER_AND_MUNICIPAL_AGENT_DIRECTORY.pdf

Kennedy Center, Inc.

- The Kennedy Center is a non-profit rehabilitation agency that offers Travel Training to senior citizens and people with disabilities other than blindness. They provide one-on-one instruction for those with cognitive, sensory, and physical disabilities. The trainer travels along with the individual when he/she uses the transit system and will continue to accompany him/her on trips until he/she reaches a skill and confidence level that enables him/her to ride without assistance. This service is free and is available throughout most of Connecticut.
- Tel: 203-365-8522
- Fax: 203-365-8533
- Email: rearlucci@kennedyctr.org

- www.thekennedycenterinc.org

Southeast Area Transit District (SEAT)

- <https://southeastareatransitdistrict.com>
- SEAT consists of nine member towns including East Lyme, Griswold, Groton, Lisbon, Montville, New London, Norwich, Stonington and Waterford.
 - ADA - When an individual's disability and/or accessibility issues to a particular destination prevent him/her from using the fixed route system, Para transit service must be provided.
 - Anyone with a disability can apply for ADA Paratransit service. A disability is defined as: "A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of major life activities of such individual; a record of such; or being regarded as having such an impairment"

Windham Region Transit District (WRTD)

- <https://wrttd.org/>
- WRTD routes include Storrs, Willimantic, North Windham, Norwich, Danielson, Franklin, and Brooklyn
 - ADA – Accessibility - Passengers with disabilities may request modifications to current service procedures to access the service.

Northeastern CT Transit District

- <http://www.nectd.org>
- NECTD routes include Brooklyn, Canterbury, Killingly, Putnam, Thompson, Eastford, Plainfield, Pomfret, Woodstock and Union
 - NECTD provides door-to-door service for pre-qualified elderly and disabled persons.

Resources for Identifying and Assisting Veterans with Mental Health Issues

Federal Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Employment Toolkit: https://www.va.gov/vetsinworkplace/docs/em_fullversionResources.asp

Which includes, among many other resources:

- Information for Employers about Veterans: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/employers_veterans.asp
- PTSD 101: PTSD Overview: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/continuing_ed/ptsd_overview.asp
- What is PTSD? https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/ptsd_basics.asp
- How common is PTSD? https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_adults.asp

Suicide Awareness and Prevention:

https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp

https://www.lovell.fhcc.va.gov/services/Suicide_Prevention_Program.asp

Veterans Crisis Hotline and range of resources for Veterans and those seeking to assist them.

<https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/education/signs-of-crisis>

<https://www.research.va.gov/topics/suicide.cfm>

Includes among many other resources additional information on Veterans and:

- Depression - <https://www.research.va.gov/topics/depression.cfm>
- Mental Health - https://www.research.va.gov/topics/mental_health.cfm
- PTSD - <https://www.research.va.gov/topics/ptsd.cfm>
- Substance Use Disorders - <https://www.research.va.gov/topics/sud.cfm>
- Traumatic Brain Injury - <https://www.research.va.gov/topics/tbi.cfm>
- Women Health - https://www.research.va.gov/topics/womens_health.cfm

Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addition Services

Regional Behavioral Health Action Orgs: <https://www.ct.gov/dmhas/cwp/view.asp?q=601578>

Local Mental Health Authorities: <https://www.ct.gov/dmhas/cwp/view.asp?q=335194>

These offer a wide range of therapeutic programs and crisis intervention services throughout the state. There are also many private non-profit agencies that which can be accessed through each of the LMHAs. <https://www.ct.gov/dmhas/cwp/view.asp?a=2902&q=335198>